DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 147 RC 020 860

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TITLE Small School Ritual and Parent Involvement.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, November 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Schools; Elementary Education; Elementary Schools; *Group Unity; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Private Schools; *School Culture; *Small Schools; Social Environment; *Socialization
IDENTIFIERS *Rituals

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ritual socialization of parents into a school community. Rituals may be mundane or sacred and typically involve actions that have transformative potential. In the context of groups, rituals may serve the purposes of identifying and constructing group identity, maintaining cohesion, and constructing and communicating values. The mundane quality and power of ritual are evident in the annual potluck dinner at one small private school in the Virginia Piedmont. Founded 10 years ago as an independent parent-run school, "Oakleaf Country School" serves approximately 50 students from preschool to fifth grade. Although the school began as a parent-run extension of home, it has become increasingly professionalized in the interests of certification and sustainability. The legacy of parent involvement remains strong, however, and the annual potluck dinner at the beginning of the school year serves to draw families to the school en masse and to communicate school values to parents. Following a detailed description of the event, an analysis points out ritualistic features that promote group cohesion, cooperation, and ideal school-family relations. Without the continued support of parents, this school could not exist financially or structurally. Events such as the potluck reinforce the importance of parents to the school and teach parents what kinds of support and involvement the school expects from them. Contains 12 references. (SV)

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Small School Ritual and Parent Involvement

Presented at American Educational Studies Association Annual Meeting
Montreal, November 1996

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Introduction

In this paper I present the ritual socialization of *parents* into a school community. How are school rituals used to construct an understanding of school goals among the school community, especially among parents? Can school-based rituals reach persons frequently considered external to school activities, such as parents? These questions concern all schools that seek to involve parents in education, a current concern among many educators.[1] Parent socialization may be even more relevant in private schools which rely on active parental decisions to enroll students: "One of the most important of these features (of developed ritual) is the need for private schools to establish and maintain the commitment of the *parental* body to the stated goals of the school" [Kapferer, 1981, 260].

While there are many school rituals, I analyze the annual potluck at a small, private elementary school to consider how the communication and construction of values and beliefs takes place. The potluck is one of the few school events that draws families to the school en masse. While school day rituals involve primarily students and teachers, the potluck school ritual may be a place where school values are constructed and communicated to students, staff, *and* parents. This study demonstrates how school rituals can extend beyond the explicit activities of schooling.

My final goal in this study is to provide further example of the mundane quality of ritual in schools. Ritual is not sacred; it is commonplace, it is useful. By recognizing the simultaneous ubiquity and power of ritual, we may acknowledge the importance of non-academic educational activities for schools. In this paper I briefly discuss parent involvement in schools, then discuss how I utilize ritual, before turning to a presentation of the potluck ritual and its analysis.

[1] See Epstein (1995). In addition, E.C.L. (1993) cautions that "parent-as-savior" attitudes to parent involvement may help schools.

Parent Involvement

Historically, schools' relations with parents vary. In early years, schools served *in loco parentis*, functioning effectively as the parent throughout the school day while the parent and child were separated. The relationship maintained a strict distance between the parents' responsibility or territory and that of the school. Neither intruded into the other's domain. This situation continued until the middle of this century. Various historical events such as school integration, school reform efforts, the civil rights and multiculturalism movements encouraged both parents and schools to work together in the socialization and education of young people.

Today, many schools call for greater parent involvement, decrying the apparent decline in PTA and other volunteer efforts [Cibulka & Kritek, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Martin, 1992; Rutherford & Billig, 1995]. Public and private school teachers in my social foundations of education courses express their concerns about declining parent involvement. Public school teachers are immediately concerned that parents do not attend parent-teacher conferences. Private school teachers, in an increasingly competitive marketplace, worry that parents will disagree with the school and take their children elsewhere. I will not discuss here some of the reasons why there is a perceived decline in parent participation; such a discussion would necessarily cover demographic and economic trends, in addition to other socio-historical factors. The present discussion simply recognizes current school-based calls for increased parent involvement.

Parent involvement may take many forms, ranging from basic obligations to participation in school governance [Philipsen, 1996]. Different forms of involvement take into consideration parental occupations, safety requirements in schools, and schools' changing needs. Other, valid forms of involvement may not be readily acknowledged by school personnel. Parents have long been expected to provide a good home environment for children, to provide them with a good breakfast and a place to study. However, parents may support their children in other, non-seen manners such as the telling of "consejos" or supportive stories [Delgado-Gaitan, 1994].

The form of parent involvement discussed here occurs through parents' support and agreement with the goals of the school. Private schools, dependent on enrollment by choice, may find this type of parent involvement especially important [Smrekar, 1996]. When parents do not agree with the goals of the private school, they are more likely to choose another school, an option

that may not be as readily available within the public school system. However, in the rising climate of public school choice, charter, and magnet schools, maintaining coherence between parent and school goals may become increasingly important for non-private schools as well. If parents could share and help construct the values of the school, then parent-schools relations may improve. The shared goal could be a point of cohesion in a too-frequently discordant relationship, at least as perceived by teachers. For schools that seek support from their families, shared goals and values cohere different individuals who intersect in the school.

Ritual and Schools

What role does ritual have in schools? Ritual once held the domain of the sacred and mysterious, referring to unknown and unspoken events performed in secret among a select group of people. Rituals were represented as being of fixed form and careful procedure. In their extremity of condition, form, and meaning, rituals were distinguished from their more mundane sisters, ritualistic acts. Kapferer, for example, describes rituals as "highly structured occasions, replicable in their form...recognized as not part of the everyday world of practical action" [Kapferer, 1981, 264]. In this context, I emphasis the ordinariness of rituals. Even if rituals may be unusual or extraordinary events, they occur within a world of practical action. Rituals, no matter how structured and discrete, occur within the context of everyday life.

The existence of rituals in the everyday has been well-discussed in the hallmarks of ritological literature [Turner, 1969; Geertz, 1983; McLaren, 1986]. Geertz, for example, describes the ritual theory of everyday social life dramas. Events of misunderstanding, renegotiation, and reconstruction are performed and understood through ritual [Geertz, 1983]. While Geertz does not completely subscribe to the Turnerian concept of ritual drama, his writings continually refer to rituals of daily life. Rituals are in the mundane, as well as the sacred, acts of life. In his landmark study, McLaren agrees that "contemporary ritologists have dissolved the mystical halo with which the liturgists have managed to keep the term ritual surrounded and have told us that rituals are constitutive of everyday human life, including secular activities" [McLaren, 1986, 36]. By exploring everyday rituals, those seemingly ordinary events gain import. Continues McLaren, "My interest lies with the practical and mundane and how these domains become sanctified inside

schools" [McLaren, 1986, 37].

Mundane as well as sacred rituals have transformative potential, according to McLaren 1986]. "Traditional" rituals of initiation and rite of passage effectively transform the identity or state of the individual. The young man becomes an adult through initiation, two individuals become one couple in marriage, an ordinary citizen becomes President through an inauguration. Yet it is not only in the new identity of an individual that rituals may transform. Rituals are acts, they involve action. Something is "done" in a ritual. That something done maybe something communicated, something restored, something shared, or something learned. The nature of true learning, of good schooling, is to transform to another state, another awareness, another sense of self and understanding. In this sense, ritual sits "naturally" in the classroom.

I find useful three forms of transformative ritual: identifying and constructing groupness, maintaining cohesion, and constructing and communicating values. These aspects of ritual share the quality of *activity*. While they do not necessarily achieve the resistance to hegemony McLaren describes as transformation, they represent potent facets of ritual events.

In his chapter "Liminality and Communitas," Turner [1969] describes rites of passage which contain and exclude members of particular groups. It is through the ritual that one becomes a member of the group. Rites of passage rituals typically reinforce shared qualities between individuals. Ignoring differences between persons may be taken to extreme through the temporary removal of persons' names. "Joe" and "Charlie" become, during the course of the fraternity initiation ritual, known by the generic term "pledges". In addition, non-members are identified by their absence in the ritual so that the definition of groupness and distinction is further constructed and communicated through the ritual.

Rituals also maintain cohesion and heal the wounds of social life, according to Turner [1969]. In moments of uncertainty and questioning, when a group lacks a shared understanding of their social existence, rituals may bring the group together and communicate anew those qualities which make the group a social unit. Geertz paraphrases Turner on this topic: "If they (social dramas) succeed, the breach is healed and the status quo, or something resembling it, is restored; if they do not, it is accepted as incapable of remedy and things fall apart into various sorts of unhappy endings: migrations, divorces or murders in the cathedral" [Geertz, 1983, 173]. The

breach can be momentarily forgotten through the encompassing and engrossing commitment to participation in the ritual.

As cohesive acts, rituals provide constancy in the midst of change. Rituals gain some of their meaning from repetition and reuse. The marriage ceremony, performed again, establishes the meaning and strength of marriage not only for the new couple, but for all of the couples in attendance. The particulars of the ceremony may change, of course, so that one wedding is held in a church and another on a hillside. The *form* of ritual, therefore, is not precisely replicable; its *meaning* and *effect* remain constant [Geertz, 1983; Turner, 1969].

In that constancy, rituals can serve as "models of" and "models for" society, representing society as we wish it would be [Geertz, 1983; Durkheim]. Rituals are a place to act out our ideal conceptions of what society could be. In the liminal place of ritual, the daily concerns that may otherwise interfere with achieving our ideals can be set aside. While the participating group may not achieve the same ideal in their everyday life, they can recall and recount the potency of the ritual moment. For a little while, they may recall, everyone was a cohesive, committed group.

A common thread throughout the literature discussed thus far is the construction and communication of values through rituals [Turner, 1969; McLaren, 1986]. Whether it is the importance of groupness, restoring a social breach, or reconceiving society, values constitute much of the meaning and purpose of rituals. Geertz presents this concept as "ethos" and "worldview", that is, how rituals give form and meaning to emotional and social life. Through the communication of values, ritual provides a mechanism for sharing a group's worldview. However ritual serves as more than a distribution medium. Ritual also becomes a place where ideologies are enacted and constructed. "Rituals do more than simply inscribe or display symbolic meanings or states of affairs but *instrumentally bring states of affairs into being*" [McLaren, 1986, 41, emphasis in original]. Rituals serve both as the medium for the message and the place where the message is created.

In addition to the everyday and transformative aspects of ritual, McLaren provides strong argument for considering ritual as a locus of power [McLaren, 1986]. Rituals may become intersections of power, as plays and enactments of power. As stated previously, part of the strength of ritual emerges out of its repetition and constancy. While the ritual may be adaptive,

certain elements must be maintained or the ritual will not be recognizable. The marriage ceremony held underwater with the participants in scuba gear may be regarded as suspect. Were the couple truly married? Through that constancy, rituals hold the potential to be abusive and deterministic. Rituals can coerce through their symbolic quality - rituals get to our emotions!

Additionally, rituals are entire body, emotive, and intellectual experiences [McLaren, 1986]. In their totality and consuming quality rituals gain significance and power. They are non-trivial. "Ritualization is a process which involves the incarnation of symbols, symbol clusters, metaphors, and root paradigms through formative bodily gesture. As forms of enacted meaning, rituals enable social actors to frame, negotiate, and articulate their phenomenological existence as social, cultural, and moral beings" [McLaren, 1986, 50].

Although rituals exist within the realm of everyday life, they are unusual experiences, kept separate and distinct, recognized as being out of the ordinary. Existing within the context of everyday life, however, rituals constitute groupness, may be transformative acts, and are places for the construction and communication of values.

Description of the school

The mundane quality and power of ritual is evident in the potluck ritual of one small private school. Founded by a group of parents as an independent, parent-run school, Oakleaf Country School[2] has, over the past decade, become a well-regarded local alternative to public schools. For years, the school scraped by on whatever donations of materials it could obtain, including desks and chairs, library books, art paper, and computers. Today, the school enjoys a strong budget, a clearly written curriculum, and a well-maintained building in the foothills of the Virginia Piedmont. Oakleaf has never had more than 55 students in grades preschool through fifth.

Oakleaf Country School has never been affiliated with an external educational philosophy or religious organization. The school's guiding body of parents, teachers, and Board of Trustees pride themselves on their close involvement with the daily and long-term functioning of the school. School members express their active involvement as a necessary foundation of the school. While in the beginning years parental involvement included cleaning the toilets, parents today are more likely to contribute funds to hire a cleaning service.

[2] All proper nouns are pseudonyms.

From its founding, Oakleaf Country School has a legacy of being parent-run. The founding parents were dissatisfied with the public and private school options in their area. They wanted a school that would be a neighborhood school. "(The school was) intended for the Oakleaf community which is why we named it that instead of some kind of generic like Piedmont School." In addition, parents wanted a school were they could be involved and where their children would feel at home. "We wanted it to be a friendly place. From the very beginning, that was so important to everybody, that it be a place where the kids could go to anyone."

While the school started as an extension of home, out of an interest in long-term sustainability, it has become increasingly professional. Every year the Board of Trustees, director, teachers and parents develop procedures and put these in writing. One year the curriculum was written down for the first time. Another year, the financial records were closely tracked and updated, prompting changes in expenditure procedures. School administration and governance has been clarified and become more hierarchical. The physical plant has been brought up to safety and child care codes. Instead of working day-to-day to keep the school running, the new Long Term Planning Committee considers how and when the school will grow and change. Now in its second decade of operation, the little school has "grown up." Some of these efforts followed an unsuccessful application for certification from the Association of Independent Schools. During that application, the school gained strong praise for its educational efforts, but with a concern that as long as the school remained parent-run it would not continue to operate.

Officially, Oakleaf Country School is no longer parent-run. The by-laws have been changed by vote to reflect current practice and intent of the parents and Board. The parents continue to elect the Board of Trustees, comprised of individuals from the school and larger community. Parents no longer hire teachers nor observe classroom teachers to evaluate their performance. The director has sole responsibility to hire, evaluate, and fire teachers. The legacy of parent involvement has not disappeared, however; it has taken on a new form.

The Annual School Potluck

Late on a Sunday at the beginning of the school year, families and teachers gather at the school for a potluck dinner. There is no other stated purpose, such as an open house, for the event.

The potluck marks the first of a series of events at which families, teachers, and staff will meet. Most family-attended events are social, although some events occur for fund raising, and a few events involve the parents in the governance of the school (such as the annual meeting of the Board of Trustees).

During the first week of school the administrator (who is also a parent) publishes the monthly school newsletter specifically to announce the beginning of the year potluck. "We have to get it out so that families know what their meal assignments are." Families from each classroom take responsibility for a different course: preschool, drinks/ice/cups; kindergarten-first grade, side/salad/bread; first-second grade, dessert; third-fourth-fifth grade, main dish. Families receive the newsletter in their mailboxes located in the school foyer. In addition, a reminder about the potluck is written on a large chalkboard placed outside of the school building.

Returning families anticipate the potluck and check the newsletter only for the date and their menu assignment. They know this opening event is coming, and look forward to it as a way to see friends they may not have seen during the summer. Although there are 14 new families (out of 49 total), the newsletter announcement speaks to returning families:

> YOU KNOW SCHOOL HAS REALLY STARTED WHEN... You get your pot-luck food assignments. Yes once again it is time to dig out the largest casserole dish from the back of the cabinet and bring out that favorite and "feeds many" recipe from the file. Our annual back to school **pot-luck** is this **Sunday the 8th at 6:00 p.m.** We will need some help with set-up and clean-up so a sign-up sheet will be at the front desk... We have 49 families in our school this year so be prepared for a rather large turn-out. No shortage of good eaters at our school!

The teachers arrive at 5:15 p.m. and by 5:30 p.m. they have set up long tables outside on the playground. Each table boasts a handwritten sign indicating what food course should be placed there in preparation for the smorgasbord. Each family arrives in their own carload as the hour approaches 6:00 p.m. The parking lot is much too small to accommodate everyone, so some families park their cars on the grass next to the road, or in the field adjacent to the preschool playground. Children immediately run to the playground and play with their friends. Parents put their dishes on the designated table, then gather around the tables, talking with other parents and watching their children. Teachers are doing most of the set-up; one teacher folds Oakleaf sweatshirts and mans the table in case of any buyers. A few parents bring chairs out from classrooms to form a semi-circle in front of the kindergarten porch steps.

At 6:15 p.m. Julia, the director, asks a student to ring the large farm bell which hangs from a pole beside the school building. She calls out from the top of the porch steps, "Ok, people! There's the bell! Let's get started! You need to be over here!" Gradually the assemblage moves from the playground toward the chairs. The youngest children grab seats, leaving the parents to stand or sit on the picnic tables which have been moved away from the porch.

Julia briefly welcomes everyone, then invites Grace, the president of the Board of Trustees, to speak. Grace encourages everyone to attend the "next social event which is the Open House. It's also a Board meeting night, so after the Open House you can stay for the Board meeting! (She feigns enthusiasm.) Please come join us, bring your questions and concerns. It's an open meeting. We hope you'll come." Julia speaks again, longer this time, introducing everybody who works for the school, including volunteers. She asks these people to come up and stand in front of the steps, then she briefly gives their name and what they do for the school. "These are the people who teach your children and make certain your children receive a wonderful education!"

"Ok, it's time for us to eat! We have developed a new order for eating this year. We want our preschool families and our new families to be buddied up with an older family. So I'll call your name, and then you will meet your buddy family and you all can go eat together." Out of 14 new families, only about four are at the potluck. Several "buddies" are not present either. Julia continues through her list until all of the new families present have gone to eat. After she calls out the families' names, Julia invites everyone else to go eat. "And make two lines. Audrey (the school office administrator) doesn't want to see a "Y" line; if you make two lines you won't have to wait until 7:30 to eat. You can reach all of the food from both sides of the table." The director instructs new families and their "buddies" to line up first, giving them preference over the other families. These specified families choose their preferred foods, before anything runs out. They choose where they will eat, usually deciding upon the picnic tables set on the grass.

Not everyone can eat at once. The design of the potluck brings each family's and teacher's separate dish onto a common table. Each person as an individual then walks the length of the table, taking a small portion of the variety of dishes. While each dish is not marked with the name of the who prepared it, a few dishes are recognized: "Oh, that's Abigail's pasta salad. Hers are always delicious." The long tables require slowly moving lines of people along each side, as they look

over the dishes and select their supper. People in line through the smorgasbord talk continuously with their neighbors. By the time the last person has reached the table, the first people in line have finished eating. Some families sit on the grass, others on picnic tables, some balance plates on laps while sitting in chairs. Children run freely, eating and running again. Parents frequently get up from their eating to play with a child then return to the meal.

While the parents get their dinners, teachers hang back, getting in line towards the end, then choosing to sit mostly with each other. As families move to the tables, the teachers stay where they sat or stood for the presentations. No one invites a teacher to join them in line. Only one teacher does not wait until the end; she is a new parent and her name was called for the front of the line. Her parental status takes precedence over her teaching role.

As parents and teachers sort themselves by lining up for the smorgasbord, I am uncertain where to stand. Although my presence is familiar to most of the individuals at the school, my role is neither one of parent, nor of teacher. I have no child enrolled in the school, so I am certainly not the former. Although I substitute teach on occasion, and teach the students and teachers how to utilize computers in the school, I am not entirely a teacher, either. With the title "School Aide/Researcher" my own standing at the school remains unclear. I recognize my ambiguity when I feel uncomfortable with the parents in line, many of whom have become friends. I don't know where to join in the ritual that centers on parents, all other persons at the margins. I settle to eat with a group of two teachers and few parents who teach special classes at the school. We, who cross boundaries of identity, hold ambiguous roles.

The director and the President of the Board do not get in line until the very end, although they are also parents. Instead, they walk up and down the line, greeting people, stopping and having brief conversations with parents.

As the sun sets, Julia walks to each small group of people, encouraging everyone to help clean up. Several teachers left quietly at 7:30 p.m. while families ate. Most parents stand about, talking, but a good number of people begin cleaning up trash, putting chairs back into the classrooms, taking apart tables, and restoring order to the school. By 8:15 p.m. almost everyone has left; only the school administration and a few parents remain to take care of any final clean-up.

Discussion: Analysis of ritual event

Ritual demonstrates the importance this school places on parent socialization. The potluck is a distinct, separate event, clearly differentiated from regular school activities by the hour and day. The potluck serves to encourage parents to come to the school and stay a while, an articulated, important aspect of this school's parent involvement.

Parents receive direct instruction in expected school behavior. In this instance, new families enjoy preferred status and other families do not interfere with their privileged moment. In other school events, it is the families of the oldest students who enjoy preferred status, such as the fifth graders and their families at the graduation meal. At the beginning of the year potluck, new parents learn to conduct themselves in a social role, talking and eating with other parents. Older parents are reminded through this ritual to make new families feel welcome by eating and talking with them. In this ritual, parents are socialized to be cooperative members of a group. At the potluck, the teachers and other staff are known by name, but parents are referred to as a group. The parents' status relative to other new and old parents becomes their salient feature. They are identified and constructed as a group. Periodically, a family may enjoy a special status, but it is temporary and always related to the matriculation of their child.

Teachers, in contrast, are taught to stand at the sidelines, keep everything running, but not to become too closely involved in the social aspect of the event. Teachers express privately their resistance to attending various after-school events. Those are the occasions at which the families take precedence, so the teachers' presumed exalted status is set aside. While teachers feel praised individually by parents and the administration, they do not have a larger group recognition of this event. In addition, the teachers are effectively relegated to the sidelines.

Although it is the families who have prepared the food, the impression of staff serving the families is evident. Staff arrive early to set up up the tables and make the school ready, staff designate where food will go. It is staff who direct how people should be served (in what order) and where they might sit. Staff conduct much (although not all) of the clean-up. A few teachers purposefully leave prior to the beginning of clean-up, utilizing the excuse that they will be teaching early in the morning. Overall, the message communicated is: "We, the staff, are doing this for you, the families." Staff remain in the background, keeping things running. Meanwhile, the families

stay in the foreground. In the one instance in which staff are called to be recognized by the director, they are joined by all volunteers and parents who serve in the school, effectively diluting any prestige teachers may have enjoyed. It is the families who are active, visible participants. Although the families participate in the meal by preparing the food, their contribution is commented upon and praised, while the teachers' background activities of organizing, setting up, and serving is not acknowledged.

Curiously, for a school that is student-centered, students at the potluck remain entirely in the background. They are mentioned in speeches only tangentially, but not as central, acting characters. Students are not introduced except as members of a family. The parents' description of the potluck dominates its definition. Students are spoken little about, they do not speak, they do not construct anything for the event. In contrast, at the end-of-year camp out, fifth graders cook dinner for all of the students and teachers, as well as some of the parents. Students organize many of the activities at the camp-out, and all of the events circle around them. At the potluck, students are almost irrelevant as families are kept at the focus.

The potluck provides a model for how school/family relations would be in their ideal sense, but not as they actually carry out every day. It is a transformative ritual [Geertz, 1983] which temporarily constructs a model of society as it could be. In the ideal setting, everyone works cooperatively, everyone has a job to do, and everyone shares responsibility. Each family contributes food, families and teachers work together to set up beforehand and clean afterwards. The actuality of the event does not meet with this ideal. However, the value of a cooperative, parent involved school exists at that moment. For those hours, parents experience involvement in their school.

Without the continued support of parents, this school could not exist financially or structurally. The importance of parents to the school is reinforced through events such as the potluck. Through this and other events, parents learn what kinds of support and involvement the school expects from them. Ideally, everyone gets their hands dirty and cleans up. Practically speaking, the teachers and other staff will ensure that everything continues running smoothly. The message is delivered.

Conclusion

The potluck is a liminal space between home and school in which everyone learns to negotiate that balance. It is a more public space than home, but cozier than school. Everyone eats together, cooks for each other, and (for the most part) shares the responsibility of cleaning. Not entirely a school, but not the same as home: this is the space the school tries to occupy on a daily basis. That ideal gets acted out during the potluck as a reminder for the days that follow.

The potluck is a shared experience for all families and school members, a time to come together, to see each other's faces. The school does not want parents to simply drop off their children at the beginning and end of the day. Parents are encouraged to come into the school, visit with each other and the teachers. Their visiting is encouraged by the socialization they participate in during the potluck. During that time, the groupness of parents is constructed and experienced–a critical value for a school dependent on tuition.

Oakleaf Country School has exerted substantial effort over the last several years to professionalize its activities. Teachers' salaries have been increased, financial and building maintenance records updated, and careful governance procedures put in place clearly putting the authority of the school in the hands of the Board of Trustees and the director. However, as this ritual demonstrates, the school continues to put its families at the center. Although the teachers are recognized professionals, the school does not deny that the families are the school's customers. As such, they are courted and looked after. In addition, appropriate family involvement in the school becomes a concern for everyone, so that the school can remain a parent-involved institution. As one parent reflects, "Parent involvement–that's what makes us unique."

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